

Ethnic minority fiction and Milan Kundera's assessment of the taxi driver

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Abstract. This paper inquires further into how reliable Milan Kundera's assessment of the taxi driver is. It seems to me that Kundera, though probably from a highly privileged background, approaches fiction writing like a member of an oppressed group: as soon as there is some problem, such as a difficult to digest sentence or a boring passage, the mainstream reader is shutting this book. Possibly the taxi driver would not be on this last chance saloon system.

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"I am no Jean Paul-Sartre

Out of the car, or I'll rip out your heart"

In his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera describes how he met a talkative taxi driver who was writing a book. "Garrulous" is the word Kundera uses! (It sounds like the title of a forthcoming novel – *Garruluity* – a paradoxical novel by this economical writer.) Kundera tells us a little of what the taxi driver said and some of his life story and he characterizes the taxi driver as possessed by a desire to write books for an unknown public. Reflecting, he writes:

What distinguishes Goethe from the taxi driver is not a difference in passions
but one passion's different results. (1996: 127)

It is difficult to avoid the impression that Kundera thinks the results of the taxi driver's efforts at writing will not be impressive and are unlikely to be cherished by the desired public. How reliable is Kundera's assessment?

Reading Kundera's book, one has the impression that he is quite pessimistic, though I suspect rightly so. "As soon as this book gets boring the reader is probably shutting it," is one of his thoughts, on this impression. And "As soon as there is some sentence which is difficult to digest, the reader is also probably shutting it." Imagine an ethnic minority member who invests in mathematical subjects because "There I can prove I am good. In literature and philosophy, it's opinion and the opinion will surely be against me." Now imagine that they are forced to write literature. They might well try to write like this, in the hope of attracting wider audiences.

There can be other reasons for why one writes as Kundera does, or tries to. But if we assume he has a pessimistic outlook, Kundera's assessment of the taxi driver may be on the harsh side, even if such an assessment scheme is entirely appropriate for Kundera himself. The taxi driver may be one of these fellows who strangely gets chance after chance. If he writes a sprawling and uneven work, a sizeable public nevertheless reads it.¹ Whatever evaluation scheme Kundera is on, that is not the scheme the taxi driver is on! The taxi driver is a kind of Jean-Paul Sartre even.

Reference. Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.

¹ Some such writers may be equally pessimistic but they are encouraged to do that, by whoever manages these things.